

Committee on House Administration  
Subcommittee on Elections  
Expanding and Improving Opportunities to Vote by Mail or Absentee  
Tuesday, October 16, 2007  
Chairwoman Zoe Lofgren  
Opening Statement

Good afternoon and welcome to the Subcommittee on Elections hearing on expanding and improving the opportunities to vote by mail or by absentee.

Absentee voting and vote by mail are increasingly being used by state and local governments. However, the concept is not a new one. Voting by mail was first tried in Monterey, California in 1977 and nearly half of the state's votes are now cast by mail.

Following this trend, many states have adopted different variations on vote by mail and absentee voting. In 1998, Oregon passed legislation directing all elections to be conducted by mail. Other states such as California, Ohio, Maine, Maryland, South Dakota, Vermont, and Washington have no fault vote by mail or allow for permanent absentee ballots. In fact, under a law signed by then Governor George Bush, Texas even allows residents to cast absentee ballots from space.

Research on vote by mail shows that it results in increased voter turnout, a less costly election, uniformed and strict compliance to state law through a centralized process, and an automatic paper trail. Voters find that vote by mail is more convenient and user friendly. It also provides them more time to study the ballot.

However, vote by mail and absentee voting is not without criticism. Some are concerned about chain of custody issues, possible voter fraud, and suppressed voter participation. While I respect those criticisms, studies show otherwise. A centralized location for ballot collection and counting results in increased security and compliance with state law. On average, vote by mail elections cost 30% less than regular polling place elections. The concern over voter fraud is overblown. Oregon, which has been doing vote by mail for the past 10 years, has only prosecuted once case of voter fraud since 1998. Vote by mail is also a significant tool used by states to maintain their voter lists. Most states which use no excuse vote by mail result in about a 15% increase in voter participation.

I think it is also important to note that absentee voting can used by our military to vote in all Federal elections. If absentee voting is good enough and secure enough for the men and women in the military, doesn't it make sense to extend that right to all eligible voters?

Absentee voting and vote by mail provide a means for qualified voters to participate in upcoming elections. Access to the democratic process for all voters, be it at the polls or by mail should be made as easy and secure as possible. Our witnesses today will discuss their experiences with absentee and vote by mail, and how the process has changed and developed over the years to ensure the integrity and accessibility of the electoral process.